

Canadian Government has Scraped the Barrel in its Symbolic Pandering

It is astonishing that, with barely a week left before the federal election, pollsters seem to agree the principal issue between the main parties is whether the face-covering niqab can be worn by a handful of women when they take their oath as new citizens of Canada, having privately satisfied authorities of their identity. It has now potentially broadened to all government positions, but the numbers are still insignificant.

This government has scraped the barrel in symbolic pandering: building new prisons and hiring new hosts of correctional officers as the crime rate declines, dispensing with elemental safeguards to due process in Bill C-51, claiming the right to expel and revoke the citizenship of dual citizens found guilty of terrorist offences, all in the name of enhanced public security, and now conducting the concluding phase of a general election campaign on an issue of no relevance involving a trivial number of people.

Of course public security requires that everybody be identifiable, but that is not what is involved here. Since the inductees into citizenship in these circumstances will have identified themselves and will have passed all formalities required for that right to be conferred, and government employees can wear authenticated identification, we are dealing only with an electoral impulse by a hard-pressed incumbent regime to set up a cultural struggle for supremacy between the values of citizenship and minority sectarian fervour.

It is particularly odd that the greatest impact of this issue appears to be in Quebec, where a large percentage of the

population is unenthusiastic about Canada and a solid majority is thoroughly irreligious, at least in practice. So what must be at stake electorally in Quebec are the understandable but misapplied reservations of French and English speaking Quebecers about having traditionalist Muslim women in their midst. Could anyone deny that there is a large number of public policy questions of infinitely greater importance and much wider partisan disagreement?

Thomas Mulcair is conducting a valiant campaign under the heavy baggage of the foibles and heirlooms of the New Democratic Party, and is inexorably losing ground to the two traditional governing parties. But he deserves immense respect, as head of a party most of whose MPs are from Quebec, in taking on the challenge of this issue so spuriously promoted by the Conservatives. Similarly, Justin Trudeau, whom the Conservatives have spent several years systematically deriding as an airhead flower child whose only qualification for high public office is surviving childbirth, deserves credit for fighting the issue of whether those convicted of terrorist defenses can be stripped of their citizenship.



Alex Urosevic for National Post
Zunera Ishaq, the Toronto woman at the centre of Canada's niqab debate, photographed at a Law Firm in downtown Toronto, October 8, 2015.

While I think Gilles Duceppe's party is nonsense and his presence as a separatist in a federal election is absurd, I also salute the leader of the Bloc Québécois for supporting Mr. Harper's participation in the campaign against the Islamic State (ISIL). It is rare and it is refreshing when political leaders take positions of principle which they know perfectly well are politically disadvantageous. It is reassuring that both the principal opposition leaders have done this.

It can give us some comfort that if either is at the head of a

government, consideration of moral principle would be a factor in decision-making. While I have agreed with most of the main policies of Stephen Harper's government over these nine years, this is a litmus test that he has not passed in recent memory. Everyone understands the political exigencies, and no reasonable person blames any politician, especially an incumbent, for going to great lengths to win. But the demagoguery and the cynicism of this government, particularly in pandering to elements that it had practically no chance of losing to its rivals, is a dismal episode which, whatever the election result, taints the record of the regime.

The government has a very defensible record and Stephen Harper on balance has unquestionably been a capable prime minister who has never embarrassed this country in the world. His fixation on shrinking the federal government's share of GDP and his preoccupation with fiscal prudence, while terribly rigid – he has become the pub bore of Canadian politics about them – is creditable. But apart from exaggerating the government's economic record and slagging off the opposition with unusual energy, he and his colleagues have done little that is substantive to persuade voters to re-elect them to serve for another four years and give Harper the longest continuous tenure of any Canadian prime minister except Laurier.

To voters wondering what is missing from the current picture, this could be part of the answer – we have not been very well entertained

Normally, long-serving governments find some humorous method of holding their challengers up to ridicule and diverting the public from arguments that it is time for a change. In this space a couple of weeks ago I mentioned Maurice Duplessis's attack on the Liberals in 1956, as he successfully sought an unprecedented and since unequaled fifth term as premier of Quebec, for the importation of "communist eggs" from Poland.

Venerable readers may remember and many younger ones will have heard recordings of U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt, running for a third term in 1940, repeating at the end of each short paragraph in a sequence the names of reactionary opposing congressmen: "Martin, Barton, and Fish" – and running for a fourth term in 1944 (both terms unique in American history) by defending his dog, a Scottie, whom it was ludicrously charged he had sent a destroyer to retrieve from an Aleutian island, at great cost to the taxpayers, on the president's way back from conferring with General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz at Pearl Harbor in 1944.

At the leadership level in this election there has been practically no trace of humour. There is indeed little evidence that either the Conservative or the NDP leader possesses a sense of humor, though it is understandable that neither much incites one in the other. By comparison, Justin Trudeau is a barrel of laughs; there are more risible criteria for deciding how to vote. Whatever else may be said of them, John Diefenbaker, Mike Pearson, Pierre Trudeau, John Turner, Brian Mulroney, Jean Chrétien, Tommy Douglas, David Lewis and Robert Stanfield all had a good and often a vivacious sense of humour. To voters wondering what is missing from the current picture, this could be part of the answer – we have not been very well entertained. Nor has there been much imagination in the composition and presentation of the main parties' programs.

The opposition complaints that the government has forfeited world respect by abandoning our traditions as peacekeepers are bunk. That role began with the notion of saving face for Britain and France in the Suez fiasco of 1956, which the American ambassador to the United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge, gave to Pearson in the corridors of the UN because if he had proposed it, the U.S.S.R. would have vetoed it. Pearson was rewarded with the Nobel Prize for Peace, the leadership of his party, and eventually, election as prime minister. It wasn't

really peacekeeping in 1956, and while peacekeepers have sometimes been useful, in general when you have war there is nothing for them to do, and when you have peace, you don't need them.

The Trudeau and Chrétien governments embraced peacekeeping as a cover for reducing the defence budget and convincing gullible Canadians that their country was making a larger contribution to stability in the world than it was. This, combined with indiscriminating foreign aid to undeserving Third World despotisms, created the popularity at the UN General Assembly that the opposition parties are now lamenting we have lost in the scandalous mockery of the hopes and intentions of its founders that the United Nations has become. In fact, to the extent that there is any truth to this, Harper has earned the country's gratitude.

It has only been an interesting campaign because it has been a legitimate three-way race, which no largely English-speaking democracy has had before, and because it is a close race. The shabby electoral tactics of the Conservatives with their reactionary posturing are at odds with a record of considerable success and competent government. Justin Trudeau seems likely to take the Liberals back from under 20 per cent of the vote in 2011 to over 30 per cent. Thomas Mulcair, though he will slip from where he started, will still bring his party in with the likely balance of power in a minority Parliament, and with many more MPs than his party or its predecessors have ever held before, apart from the freakish Quebec break-through Jack Layton reaped four years ago.

Polls that use automated electronic telephone calls had until lately seemed to foresee a distinct Conservative lead, but they are not serious polls, on this or any other subject. In any case they now agree with polls that actually require an animated response, which have long predicted a ding-dong battle between the Conservatives and Liberals for first place. No disinterested source is predicting a majority for anyone.

I have presumed to advise readers four elections in a row to vote Conservative, and will carefully consider and very respectfully formulate a recommendation for this election and the reasons for it next week.

First published in the